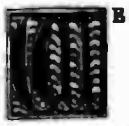
The Builder.

No. CCCXCII.

SATURDAY, AUGUST 10, 1850.



E want to do two things: first, to mention the partial completion of Mr. Britton's Auto-Biography for the subscribers to his testimonial; and, secondly, to reply to two or three earnest seekers for advancement, labouring under difficulties, who have recently addressed us,—young and anxious men aspiring for victory, but fearful of the battle, not for want of courage, but of arms. Loudly we sing with Wordsworth,—

"O! for the coming of that glorious time,
When prizing knowledge as her noblest wealth
And best protection, this imperial realm,
While she exacts allegiance, shall admit
Like obligation on her part to teach
Them who are bound to serve her and obey;
Binding herself by statute to secure
For all the children whom her soil maintains
The rudiments of letters, and inform the mind
With moral and religious truth,
Both understood and practised."

The subject of our first purpose will effect our second: the Auto-Biography of Mr. Britton, and the analytical account of his works attached to it, will serve to show, to use the writer's own words, "what may be effected by zeal and industry, with humble talents, and without academic learning." By energy and industry, clear-headedness, method, and singular powers of arrangement, Mr. Britton contrived to emerge, unfriended and uneducated, from the menial position in which circumstances placed him to begin the world, and originated and carried out a long series of valuable works, which have had a most important influence on various branches of art, and have entitled him to the gratitude of the whole community. Look at the miserable cot in which he was born at Kington, Wiltshire,* on the 7th July, 1771, and which had a better aspect than most of its neighbours, as the walls were "rough-cast" and white-washed. The roof was thatched: one room "served for parlour, and kitchen, and hall," and this was 6 feet 6 inches high, with a large beam beneath the ceiling. His father was a baker and maltster; was afterwards ruined, and lost his senses. Our author had but little schooling, it would seem, and much bad example. At sixteen he was sent to London, and was apprenticed by an uncle to Mr. Mendham, of the Jerusalem Tavern, Clerkenwell, where he was daily employed for ten or eleven hours in bottling, corking, and binning wine in the gloomy, cob-webbed cellar represented in the volume. He had no time for reading but by stealth, had ill health, and no encouragement to get information. He grew desponding, and his health becoming worse instead of better, his master ultimately gave up half a year out of six years' service, presented him with two guineas instead of twenty promised, and sent him into the world to shift for himself as he best could. Towards the termination of his apprenticeship, he became acquainted with Mr. Essex (father of the present well-known painter in enamel of that name), who lived by painting figures on watch faces; and at Mr. Essex's shop he first met Mr. E. W. Brayley, with whom since he has ever been closely connected. He entered into partnership with Mr. Brayley to publish a satirical ballad, called "The Guinea Pig," written by the latter, and to this he affirms are to be attributed "The Beauties of England and Wales," "The Cathedral Antiquities," "The Architectural Antiquities," and various other publications.

Between the time of his release from the cellars and the adoption of literature as a profession, he experienced seven years of vicissitudes and hardships.

"In very poor and obscure lodgings, at eighteen pence per week, (he says), I indulged in study; and often read in bed during the winter evenings, because I could not afford a fire. When my finances allowed I frequented free-and-easy, odd-fellows', and spouting clubs; but my expenses never exceeded sixpence a-night at any of these associations of smokers, drinkers, and convivialists. Knowing the value and truth of the maxim, "a penny saved is a penny got," I abstained from laying out money on any article not absolutely wanted, particularly on beer and spirits. These associations led to debating societies, then very numerous and popular in London, and to private theatres and lectures; but the last were very rare. Some of these pursuits and associations were not merely amusing for the time, but became ultimately of great benefit, as conducive to mental improvement, to correction of manners, language, and personal deportment, and also tending, in some degree, to cure a nervous timidity and shyness which belonged to my natural disposition."

He journeyed on foot to Plympton, a distance of 216 miles: returning, he endeavoured to obtain the situation of cellarman, at the White Hart, in Bath, but failed and came back to the metropolis, almost penniless, shoeless, and shirtless. He was then employed as cellarman at the London Tavern, where he was in the cellar from seven in the morning till eleven at night, but could only remain three months, and then engaged as clerk and cellarman with a widow in Smithfield. His next engagement was with Mr. Simpson, an attorney, with whom he continued three years, at 15*s.* a week. "With this small income," he says, "I felt comfortable and happy; as it provided me with a decent lodging, clothes, and food, and with the luxury of books. Having but little writing for my master, who neither had, nor was qualified to execute, much business, I was enabled to devote time to reading; and out of two hours for dinner, I could easily appropriate more than one to booksellers' shops and stalls, by which I acquired a progressive knowledge of "the trade," as well as of the value and contents of books. In the evenings I frequented the clubs and societies already referred to, and formed connections and even friendships with many persons devoted to similar pursuits."

The death of Mr. Simpson led him to Messrs. Parker and Wix's, of Hatton-garden, where he obtained 20*s.* a-week: while there he joined a debating society in Coachmaker's Hall, where he made several acquaintances. We need not, however, follow our old friend farther in his career: he was now beginning to feel his way, and in 1799 he published his first acknowledged and independent work, "The Enterprising Adventures of Pizarro!" From that time to this, a period of fifty-one years, he has been constantly engaged in literary occupation, the results of which are well known to most of our readers. "The Beauties of Wiltshire," was begun in 1801; the "Beauties of England and Wales," in conjunction with Mr. Brayley, in the same year; the "Architectural Antiquities" in 1805; and the "Cathedral Antiquities" in 1814.

In 1845, as our readers may remember, a subscription was commenced, to present to Mr. Britton a testimonial of appreciation of his many useful labours; and it was in return for this that he undertook the autobiography now before us. This has extended itself to two fully illustrated volumes, consisting of three parts. The first, at present incomplete, consists of the narrative of his life, with incidental notices of men and events; the second part is entirely occupied with an analytical account of his various works, carefully written by Mr. T. E. Jones, his secretary for fifteen years; and the third part contains several miscellaneous essays, by the author, on various subjects, and some anecdotical matter.

We extract the following curious information from the concluding observations of the second part:—

"In the five volumes of the 'Architectural Antiquities,' the author had 30*l.* per number for the first four volumes, with 10*l.* additional for such numbers as were reprinted, to meet an increased demand. The fifth volume requiring much greater research, his remuneration was increased to 50*l.* per number; and the total so charged by him amounted to more than 1,600*l.*, during a period of twenty-one years. The sale of the four volumes was profitable in its result: from the commencement; whilst that of the fifth, and most elaborate, was uniformly unsuccessful. At the time of Mr. Taylor's death upwards of 7,000*l.* had been divided between the partners as profit on the four volumes; whilst the fifth had barely paid its own expenses. The stock, coppers, &c., of the whole were sold together; and the final balance-sheet showed a general net profit of about 9,800*l.* (from 1805 to 1826), the author's share of which was 3,266*l.* Large as this sum appears, when added to the payment for authorship, it is obvious that, had the same amount of talent, labour, and expenditure, been employed in trade or commerce, a greater return might have been realised.

The 'Cathedral Antiquities' belonged to the same parties and in the same proportions; but Mr. John Le Keux was admitted, during the progress of the work, to one-seventh share of the profits. The author was allowed 50*l.* per number, as a fair remuneration for travelling expenses, collection of materials, directions to draftsmen, engravers, printers, authorship, &c.; but in the year 1824, when the work had proved unprofitable, he voluntarily allowed 20*l.* per number to remain upon the credit of the publication, in the hope that it would ultimately be prosperous.* When the remainder was sold by auction, a loss of more than 400*l.* had been sustained, which, however, the proceeds of the sale converted into a profit of 2,900*l.*—an amount barely equivalent to interest on the proprietors' advances during the twenty-one years (1814—1835) over which they had extended.

The profits on 'Pugin's Specimens' was about 1,400*l.* This was the joint property of Mr. Britton, Mr. Pugin, and Mr. Josiah Taylor. The first kept the accounts, and charged 150*l.* for authorship, of which, however, more than 100*l.* was paid to his friend, Mr. E. J. Willson."

Returning once more to those who have addressed us on the hopelessness of their struggle with the world, we would say, Take heart by what Mr. Britton and others have done, and work on: energy and industry will overcome great difficulties, and remember that now, as ever, "the only road to human welfare is by the old steadfast-highway of well doing, along which all must travel earnestly, adjusting themselves to whatsoever weather may from day to day befall. No good time ever came by accident. It is the very law of man's present, as of his ultimate salvation, that he shall work it out with a sacred "fear and trembling," with zealous, undaunted effort, with daring and exalted enterprise. That fable of the twelve stupendous labours of the

* This village was also the birthplace of John Aubrey, the first Wiltshire antiquary.

* The 20*l.* per number was, however, finally abandoned.

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